

CHART

ILLUSTRATION

THE SIEGE & DEFENCE

OF FORT ERIE.

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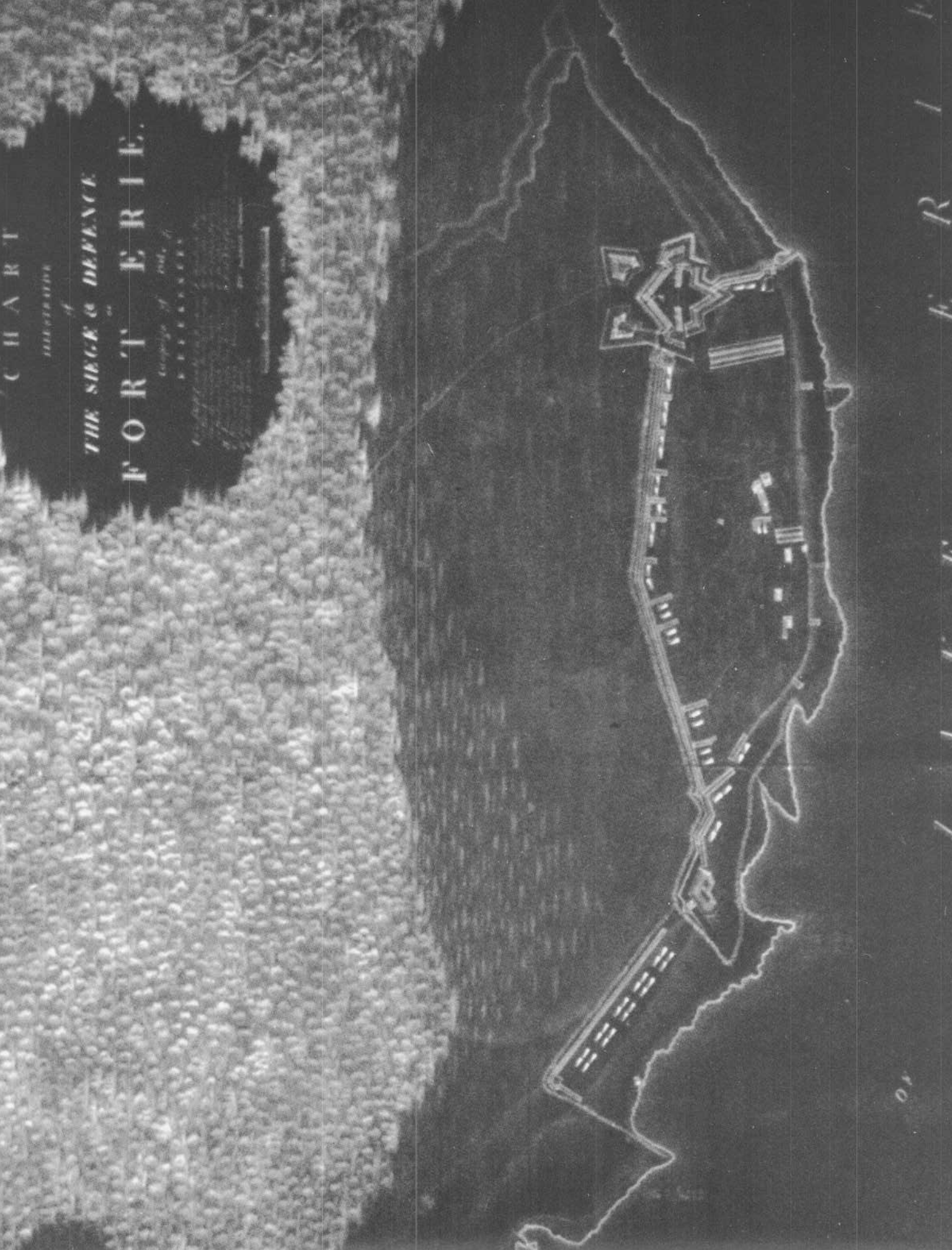
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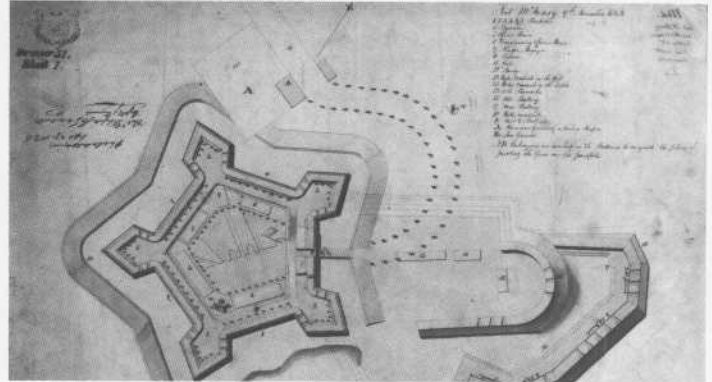
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# Engineers in the War of 1812

Plan of Fort McHenry.



National Archives

After the Revolution, engineer officers did not see combat again until the War of 1812. In that war their record was exceptional in comparison to the record of the other branches of the Army. When the war broke out in June, the Corps of Engineers' actual strength was only 17 officers and 19 enlisted men. Although Congress had authorized the Corps 22 officers and 113 enlisted men in April 1812, full strength was not approached until 1815. West Point graduates dominated the list of officers serving in the Corps and for all it was their first experience in combat.

During the years immediately preceding the conflict engineer officers had worked full-time constructing permanent defenses along the Atlantic coast. As the war progressed, the War Department increasingly transferred engineers to serve in the field on the Northern frontier. In combat the engineers performed many of the same tasks they had in the Revolution—constructing fortifications, reconnaissance and mapping and assisting the movement of armies. In at least two instances engineer officers directed construction of quarters. Still, fortifications were the primary concern of the engineers during the War of 1812 as they had been earlier. Despite the views of later critics, coastal harbors heavily fortified by the engineers did deter British attack. Notable examples of this were at Fort Meigs and Fort McHenry in Baltimore.

The War Department had debated with the engineers over their desire for command responsibility since 1802. Jonathan Williams, the first superintendent of West Point, had even resigned his position over the issue. During the War of 1812 engineer officers assumed command responsibility for the first time. Captain Charles Gratiot, later Chief Engineer, at one point commanded all forces in Michigan Territory. In 1813 Joseph G. Swift, another future Chief Engineer, commanded line units on Staten Island in addition to Fort Richmond and Hudson Battery. By late the next year he commanded the entire New York operation, which included more than 10,000 soldiers and civilian volunteers.

The performance of the Army engineers in combat between 1812 and 1815 helped them earn respectability and strengthened the military academy at West Point, which had been languishing on the eve of the war. While many battles in this indecisive war ended in a stand-off, the results might have been far worse without the contributions of the Army engineers.



Library of Congress

Battle of Lundy's Lane, where Army engineers figured prominently, July 1814.

Map of Fort Erie depicting how Army engineers changed the old British fort into a bastion.

National Archives